



DECISION MEMO

Discovery Ski Area Improvement Project

USDA Forest Service
Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest
Pintler Ranger District
Granite County
T6N, R13W, Sec 28

BACKGROUND

Discovery Ski Area is operated under a special use permit by the Discovery Ski Corporation and is located on the Pintler Ranger District near Georgetown Lake in the Clark Fork Flint Landscape of the Georgetown Lake Management Area. The ski area is responsible for operation and maintenance of ski runs, ski lifts, buildings, main access road, and parking areas, which provide access to the lodge and ski lifts. In addition, ski area parking lots provide access to the Echo Lake Cross-Country Ski trail system. A variety of factors, including changes in skier use patterns, safety concerns related to pedestrian/skier access to ski area facilities, and operational needs, has resulted in the need for this project.

Over the past several years downhill and cross-country ski use has increased and as a result, there is an increase in demand for parking and access to and from the lodge. The existing parking configuration of the upper and lower lots represents an inefficient use of limited space and results in vehicles parking outside of designated parking areas and along pull outs on the main road. Expansion of existing parking areas is limited due to topography and riparian areas. There has been a steady increase of skiers and due to the limitations of the parking areas and inability to expand those, skiers are parking along the main access road. It is anticipated the growth will continue; therefore there is a need to provide adequate and safer parallel parking along the access road to meet the increased demand for parking and provide access to and from the lodge. Widening the road to meet Forest Service standards for two-lane roads with parallel parking would provide for safe access to and from the lodge. Approximately 20 – 50 trees would be removed based on the final road design. Most of the trees are less than 4 inches in diameter.

Currently skiers use the main road and parking area to ski from the lodge/lifts to the north parking areas that can pose a safety hazard for skiers on a gravel/uneven surface as well as for vehicles moving in the parking area. The north parking area also serves as a trailhead for cross country skiers connecting to the Echo Lake and Cable Run cross country ski trails. This has created safety issues with vehicle and pedestrian traffic being in the same areas. Providing a ski trail from the lodge to the North parking areas would reduce pedestrian use in the parking area and along the main access road and provide for public safety. Construction of the trail would require approximately 20 trees to be removed, of which 5 – 7 trees would be larger than 5 inches in diameter.

Further exacerbating the pressures on limited parking is the storage by the ski area of heavy equipment (e.g., snow removal and grooming equipment) in the main upper lot. Equipment has been stored here because of access to power. By moving this heavy equipment to the lower parking area, additional skier parking would be made available closer to the main lodge. This would help reduce parking congestion in the more popular upper

lot and provide for safer skier access to the ski area but it would require a power source to ensure equipment can be kept warm in sub-zero temperatures in the winter. Currently, the lower parking area does not have power. No trees would be removed to install an underground utility line across the parking lot.

In addition to greater demand for parking, the increased use has also resulted in larger numbers of skiers using the East Chair lift. The top terminal/unloading area is steep and uneven and becomes congested with inexperienced skiers as they offload from the ski lift. Redesign of the offloading ramp would improve offloading congestion and provide for safer egress from the ski lift. Approximately 25 trees of varying sizes would be removed for this project.

An opportunity exists to reduce utility costs and increase sustainability by installing solar power. Solar power would be used to bank power in the summer which in turn would be used to offset winter energy bills. To be eligible for utility offset, however, the State of Montana requires solar panels be connected to the same meter where it would be used to offset costs. This would require trenching and installation of new utility lines to connect the solar infrastructure to the main meter. No trees would be removed with this project.

Low snow levels and high wind conditions can cause the Winning Ridge Ski Trail to become windswept, resulting in exposure of rocks and vegetation and creating skier hazards along the Winning Ridge Ski Trail. These conditions require an alternate trail to provide skiers with a safe route to get off the ski hill when these conditions exist along this ski run. Construction of 200-foot route off the Winning Ridge Ski Trail would allow for safer egress off this ski run. Approximately 100 trees, most of which are under 4 inches in diameter, would be removed.

DECISION

I have decided to approve the following improvements within the permitted area for Discovery Ski Area:

1. Main Access Road Widening and Gravel Surfacing. Widen the main access road by removing approximately 20-50 trees and vegetation along 1,500 feet to accommodate the existing parallel parking on one or both sides of the road to meet Forest Service standards for roads and parking. Currently the public parks along the road which reduces the driving width of the road to less than two-lane. Road width specifications will provide a 24-foot driving surface and 10-foot parking on one or both sides of the road. The widened access road will be cleared and gravel placed on the roadway to meet Forest Service standards for two-lane roads and parking.
2. Parking Area Widening. Two parking areas will be squared off to provide improved parking and maintenance by ski area staff. Total vegetation (Douglas fir and spruce) removal will be approximately one-third (1/3) acre.
3. Ski Trail Construction.
 - a. Lodge to North Parking Area Ski Trail. A cat-track ski trail (20' x 500') will be constructed by removing approximately 20 trees and other vegetation beginning at the bottom of Northern Lights chair lift to the Cable Run cross country trailhead to provide safe passage of skiers to the overflow parking area on the north side. The trail will be located adjacent to the existing north parking area.
 - b. Winning Ridge Cat Trail. Construct an alternate ski trail to avoid a section of the Winning Ridge ski run that scours during low snow-wind conditions causing rocks and other vegetation to be visible that could be a safety hazard. The trail will be constructed approximately 200 feet long by 15-30 feet wide including cuts and fills. Approximately 100 trees, less than 4 inches, will be

removed. The trail will be closed to motorized uses except for grooming equipment used during the ski season.

4. Power Line Installation.

a. Winning Ridge Power Line Installation Discovery is planning to install solar panels on private property that will be used to 'bank' power in the summer to offset winter energy bills. To do this the State of Montana requires the panels be connected to the same meter where it will be used to offset costs. The project will bury a powerline approximately 5,000 feet in length from Winning Ridge to the top terminal of the Silver Chief Lift. In the long-term the lift will operate with electricity instead of diesel. The powerline will be buried in the ski-run where vegetation is already removed.

b. Parking Area Power. Bury a 110 volt powerline in the parking area for approximately 1,500 feet from the lodge to the lower parking area.

5. Lift Unloading Area Improvements. To provide for safer unloading and less congestion at the Easy chair lift terminal, approximately 25 trees and re-contouring approximately 0.25 acres of slope will be completed to reduce ramp slope and provide more open space to help better disperse skiers offloading from the lift.

MITIGATION AND DESIGN FEATURES REQUIRED BY THIS DECISION

Hydrology

- Project activities occurring within: 1) 300' of perennial streams, 2) 150' of ponds, lakes, reservoirs, and wetlands greater than 1 acre, and 3) 100' from intermittent streams and wetlands less than 1 acre will require Hydrologist/Fisheries Biologist site specific review to ensure activity within riparian conservation areas (RCAs) maintains or improves RMOs.

Vegetation

- Noxious weeds will be controlled following procedures in the Noxious Weed Control Program ROD (2002) for the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest.

Roads

- National Best Management Practices for Water Quality Management on NFS Lands will be followed for all road maintenance and construction activities.
- The road plan will be reviewed and approved by Forest Service Engineer and Hydrologist prior to construction to ensure Forest Service standards are met.

Timber

- Timber staff will be notified prior to cutting of merchantable timber to determine if a timber settlement sale is warranted. Trees that are cut may be limbed, bucked up and left in place or cut and decked where the Forest Service will determine the most appropriate method for removal. Burning of residual slash will occur on site based on approval by the Forest Service. Any payments due the Forest Service will be completed prior to the removal of timber off National Forest System lands.

REASONS FOR CATEGORICALLY EXCLUDING THE PROPOSED ACTION

An action may be categorically excluded from further analysis and documentation in an environmental impact statement (EIS) or environmental assessment (EA) if it is within one of the categories identified by the USDA in 7 CFR part 1b.3 or 7 CFR part 1b.3 or 36 CFR 220.6(d) or (e), and there are no extraordinary circumstances related to the decision that may result in a significant individual or cumulative effect on the quality of the human environment.

This project has been reviewed in accordance with FSH 1909.15 Chapter 30. I have determined the project fits the following categories:

36 CFR 220.6(d)(4). Repair and maintenance of roads, trails, and landline boundaries.

36 CFR 220.6(e)(1). Construction and reconstruction of trails.

36 CFR 220.6(e)(3). Approval, modification, or continuation of minor special uses of NFS lands that require less than five contiguous acres of land.

I have determined that the activities included in the Proposed Action fit within the categories and are the appropriate ones to authorize this decision because

- Main Access Road Widening and Gravel Surfacing falls under the *Repair and maintenance of roads, trails, and landline boundaries*;
- Parking Area Widening falls under the *Approval, modification, or continuation of minor special uses of NFS lands that require less than five contiguous acres of land*;
- Ski Trail Construction falls under the *Construction and reconstruction of trails*;
- Power Line Installation falls under the *Approval, modification, or continuation of minor special uses of NFS lands that require less than five contiguous acres of land*; and
- Lift Unloading Area Improvements falls under *Approval, modification, or continuation of minor special uses of NFS lands that require less than five contiguous acres of land*.

My decision is based on a review of the project record that shows a thorough review of relevant scientific information, a consideration of responsible opposing views, and the acknowledgement of incomplete or unavailable information. The record includes the following resource specialist reports or documentation of review:

- Biological Assessments for Aquatic, Botany, and Wildlife TES species
- Tribal and Heritage Resources
- Soils
- Hydrology
- Inventoried Roadless Areas and Special Designations
- Scenery

By definition, categorical exclusions do not individually or cumulatively have significant effects on the human environment (40 CFR 1508.4). Resource specialists considered direct and indirect effects from the Proposed Action coupled with past, present, and reasonably foreseeable actions. I have examined the Proposed Action

and the effects analyses disclosed in the resource specialist reports listed above and conclude that without notable individual effects from the Proposed Action, there would be no discernable cumulative effects.

EXTRAORDINARY CIRCUMSTANCES

The interdisciplinary team reviewed the resource conditions listed in FSH 1909.15 Chapter 30 (31.2) and other concerns applicable to this project to determine whether any extraordinary circumstances exist. The mere presence of one or more of the resource conditions listed below does not preclude the use of a categorical exclusion. It is the existence of a cause-effect relationship between a proposed action and the potential effect on these resource conditions, if such a relationship exists, and the degree of potential effect of a proposed action on these resource conditions that determine whether extraordinary circumstances exist.

The following table provides a summary of the final determinations regarding the cause-effect relationship between the Proposed Action and degree of potential effect on the resource conditions in the left-hand column in the table below. All specialist reports (available in the project record) have been finalized and I have reviewed them in detail prior to reaching this decision.

Table 1. Potential Effects to Resource Conditions Considered for Extraordinary Circumstances

RESOURCE CONDITION	POTENTIAL EFFECT
Federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat, or Forest Service sensitive species.	Threatened or Endangered Species: The proposal may but is not likely to adversely affect the threatened grizzly bear or Canada lynx and their critical habitats. There would be no jeopardy to the wolverine and its critical habitat. No Impact to all sensitive terrestrial, aquatic, and plant species.
Floodplains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds	Negative impacts to the municipal watershed, floodplains, or wetlands are not projected.
Congressionally designated areas, such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or national recreation areas.	There are no congressionally designated areas such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or national recreation areas within or adjacent to the project area. Therefore, negative impacts to any congressionally designage areas will not occur.
Inventoried Roadless Areas (IRAs) or potential wilderness areas	There are no IRAs or potential wildenress areas within the project area. Therefore, negative impacts to any IRAs or potential wilderness areas will not occur.
Research Natural Areas (RNAs)	There are no research natural areas within the project area. Therefore, negative impacts to any research natural areas will not occur.
American Indians and Alaska Native religious or cultural sites. Archaeological sites or historic properties or areas.	A field inventory was completed and no sites were located inside the project area of potential effect. Because no cultural resources were located in the project area, there will be no effects to cultural resources.

I find that the determinations reached in the extraordinary circumstances consideration table above maintain a high degree of certainty. Therefore, I am confident that this project would have no significant effect on the human environment, individually or cumulatively, and no uncertainty exists regarding this degree of potential effect. I have reviewed the individual specialist reports submitted for detailed descriptions of the methods and data used to come to these determinations if a written analysis was required.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

This project was first published on the SOPA on August 23, 2019. The scoping period for this project began on September 5, 2019. The scoping notice was sent to Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks Department. They responded they had no comments on the proposal. No other comments were received.

FINDINGS REQUIRED BY LAW

Land and Resource Management Plan

The National Forest Management Act (NFMA) requires the development of long-range land and resource management plans. The Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest Plan (FP) was approved in 2009 and provides guidance for all natural resource management activities on the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest. NFMA also requires that all projects and activities be consistent with the plans. The decision is consistent with Forest Plan direction including all applicable standards, goals, and objectives.

National Forest Management Act

The Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) was approved in 2009, as required by this Act. The Forest Plan has been reviewed in consideration of this project and the project meets all applicable management direction, including consistency with all applicable standards.

On April 9, 2012 the Department of Agriculture issued a final planning rule for National Forest System land management planning (2012 Rule) 77 FR 68 [21162-21276]). None of the requirements of the 2012 Rule apply to projects and activities on the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest, as the 2009 Beaverhead-Deerlodge Forest Plan was developed under a prior planning rule (36 CFR §219.17(c)). Furthermore, the 2012 Rule explains, "[The 2012 Rule] supersedes any prior planning regulation. No obligations remain from any prior planning regulation, except those that are specifically included in a unit's existing plan. Existing plans will remain in effect until revised" (36 CFR §219.17).

Endangered Species Act

See the "Reasons for Categorically Excluding the Proposed Action" Section of this document, and Table 1, for a summary of the effects of this project to Endangered, Threatened, or Candidate Species for the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest (list dated August 8, 2017). The summary is based on a more thorough analysis available in the project record. This project is consistent with the requirements of the Endangered Species Act.

Sensitive Species (Forest Service Manual 2670)

This direction requires analysis of potential impacts to sensitive species and the Regional Forester approved the sensitive species list on February 25, 2011 (updated on August 26, 2011 to include white bark pine). Our review of the potential effects of this decision upon sensitive species has been completed and the analysis documented in the project file and Resource Condition Table above.

Environmental Justice (Executive Order 12898)

This Executive Order requires consideration of whether projects would disproportionately affect minority or low-income populations in or around the project area. Based on internal review and public scoping, the Proposed Action did not identify any adversely impacted local minority or low-income populations.

Clean Water Act

The intent of the Act is to restore and maintain the integrity of waters. The Forest Service complies with this Act through the use of Best Management Practices (BMPs). This decision incorporates Best Management Practices to ensure protection of soil and water resources and complies with the Clean Water Act and State water quality standards.

Clean Air Act

Under this Act, areas of the country were designated as Class I, II, or III airsheds for "Prevention of Significant Deterioration" purposes. There will be no air quality impacts as a result of this decision.

The National Historic Preservation Act

As discussed earlier in this document and in detail in the project file, impacts to cultural resources are not expected.

Migratory Bird Treaty Act

There will be no known substantial losses of migratory bird habitat expected from the implementation of this proposal.

National Environmental Policy Act

Implemented in 1970, this Act requires public involvement and consideration of potential environmental effects. This decision memo and the project record provide documentation of compliance with this Act.

Other Laws or Requirements

The Proposed Action is consistent with all other Federal, State, and/or local laws or requirements.

ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW OPPORTUNITIES

Decisions made under Categorical Exclusions are not subject to objection pursuant to 36 CFR 218.

IMPLEMENTATION DATE

This decision is not subject to objection pursuant to 36 CFR 218 and may begin immediately. Work is expected to commence in November 2019.

CONTACT PERSON

Supporting documentation for this decision is available for public review at the Pintler Ranger District, 88 Business Loop, Philipsburg, MT 59858. Further information about the decision can be obtained from Cameron Rasor, District Ranger, during normal office hours (Monday through Friday, 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.) at the address above, or by phone at (406) 859-3211, by mail, or via email to cameron.rasor@usda.gov.

RESPONSIBLE OFFICIAL



CAMERON RASOR
District Ranger
Pintler Ranger District

November 15, 2019

Date

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